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3. Southwest History & Neighborhood Context

Neighborhood History

The Southwest was an integral part of the original plan for Washington DC by Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant. It was to be connected to the Capitol and the National Mall by Virginia, Delaware and Maryland Avenues, and included a key stretch of piers for waterfront commerce on the Potomac River. A major public square was to be located at the waterfront at the intersection of 8th and K Streets, which would include a "Naval Honorary Column", commemorating the achievements of the US Navy.

The area was eventually laid out much as anticipated by the L'Enfant Plan, but periodic flooding and low-lying tidal flats prevented productive use of the waterfront. A devastating flood in 1881 spurred Congress to enact a plan to reclaim the Potomac flats. Major Peter Conover Hains undertook an eight-year project to dredge a shipping channel along the Southwest Waterfront, using the resulting fill to create new land at the western end of the National Mall, and to create what would become Hains Point. This new land mass separated the Washington Channel from the Potomac River, transforming the character of the Southwest Waterfront.

Hains included in his plan a series of flushing basins at the northern end of the project, to supply fresh water for the regular purification and cleansing of the Washington Channel, and to create ornamental landscapes for strolling connected to the Mall. The resulting Tidal Basin continues to serve the latter purpose, but without the intended flushing, the Washington Channel, connected to the tidal Anacostia, remains a polluted waterway in need of environmental restoration.

In 1897, over the objections of real estate speculators, Congress designated the reclaimed flats "Potomac Park", permanently reserving the vast area as public parkland for the District. East Potomac Park, owned and maintained by the National Parks Service, now serves the Southwest and the city as a whole with over 600 acres of open space.

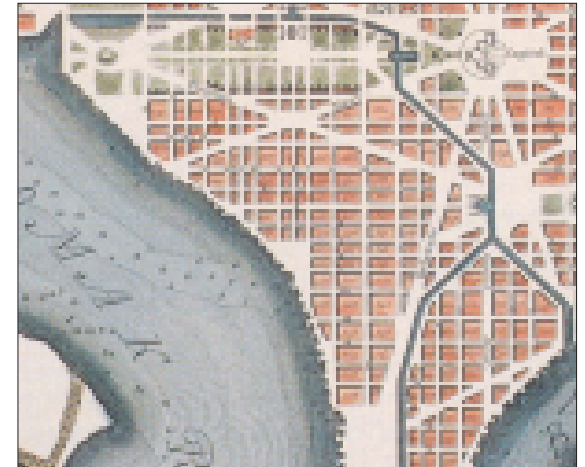


FIGURE 3.1
L'Enfant Plan as Modified by Ellicot, 1792

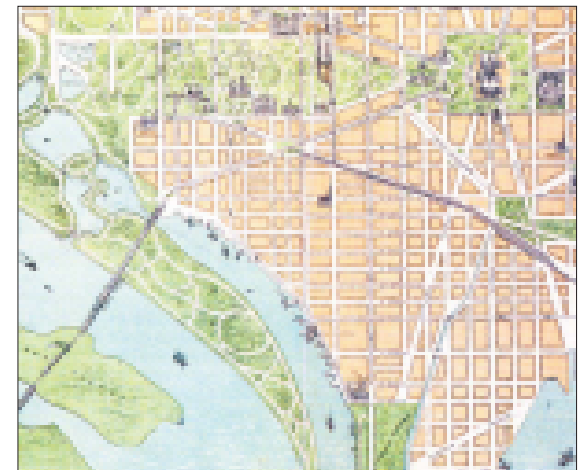


FIGURE 3.2
DuBois Map of Washington, 1892



FIGURE 3.3
Aerial View along Southwest Waterfront (c.1931)



FIGURE 3.4
View of Old Waterfront Market (c.1958)

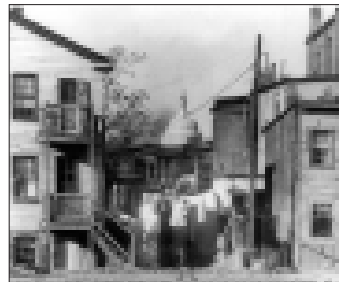


FIGURE 3.5
View from I Street to the Capitol (c.1950)



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During the early 1900s, the Southwest neighborhood developed as a blue collar community of low-rise townhouses populated by workers in the nearby waterfront and industrial districts. The creation of a navigable shipping channel allowed the development of the waterfront as an active shipping area catering to a wide range of industries. Despite its large population and active industrial functions, the neighborhood would be targeted by the District and Federal Government for redevelopment. The 1950 Comprehensive Plan for the District identified the Southwest as one of several "Principal Problem Areas" of the city, defined as an area with "obsolete" characteristics of overcrowding and substandard housing conditions.

In 1952, the Redevelopment Land Agency and Federal City Council undertook a dramatic plan to demolish and redevelop the entire Southwest quadrant. The plan included the relocation of most of the area residents, and the creation of new modern housing designed to attract middle-class suburban residents back to the city, and thus bolster the District's declining tax base. The plan included the closing of numerous L'Enfant streets to create "superblocks" for large housing complexes. It also promoted the Southeast/Southwest Freeway, part of a larger goal of creating an "inner loop" of highways. The Freeway was the only part of the system to be completed, creating a barrier that would cut off the Southwest from the rest of the city, giving the area a sense of isolation and remoteness.

The redevelopment of the waterfront formed a part of the plan designated "SW Project Area C", and controlled by developer William Zeckendorf. With his architects I.M. Pei and Harry Weese, Zeckendorf imagined a vast complex of offices, cultural centers, housing for 4,000 families, and commerce stretching from the Smithsonian Institution to Fort McNair. The Tenth Street Mall and L'Enfant Plaza would lead to the Tenth Street Overlook, with a broad vista over the waterfront. Plans to connect Tenth Street to Maine Avenue would have created a means of circulating between the waterfront and the city, but were abandoned because of engineering complications.

The waterfront itself was to be activated by restaurants, marinas, and retail complexes. The design trends of the 1950's and 60's led to these areas being dominated by automobile access and parking, however, with little accommodation for landscaping or pedestrian spaces. The highway-like character of Maine Avenue, the redundancy of Water Street, and the surface parking lots all created an inhospitable barrier between the new housing complexes to the east and the waterfront promenade, itself an inadequately designed pedestrian space.

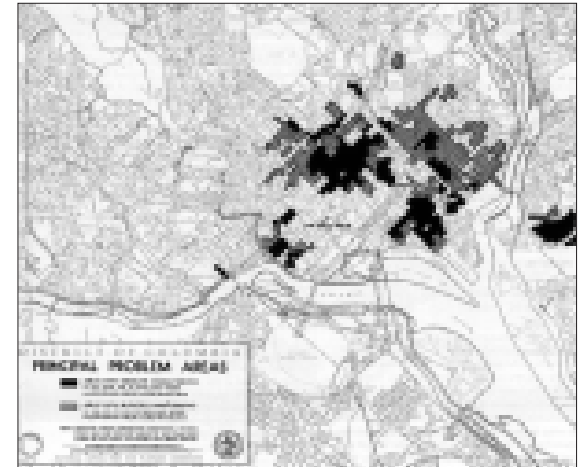


FIGURE 3.6
Urban Blight Map



FIGURE 3.7
Zeckendorf Plan



FIGURE 3.8
SW after Demolition from Urban Renewal



FIGURE 3.9
Construction of Waterside Town Center



FIGURE 3.10
Historic View along Waterfront looking South



Current Neighborhood Context

Social and Economic Diversity

Despite a history of upheaval and transformation, the Southwest neighborhood has matured and stabilized in recent decades. It is now a strong urban community which benefits from the wide social, ethnic and economic diversity of its residents. The diversity and strong sense of community of the Southwest contrasts with less successful urban renewal projects in other US cities. This is due in part to efforts by the National Park and Planning Commission during the redevelopment process in the 1980's to distribute the income levels of residents, and to encourage neighborhood design that included a mix of high-rises with lower scaled buildings and townhouses.

Today the Southwest is more ethnically and racially diverse than the District as a whole, with a population that is 55% African-American, 41% white, and 4% hispanic and other ethnic groups. According to 1998 data, the median household income was \$47,511, \$4,500 greater than the median income for the District. One-half of Southwest households earn incomes in the middle range (\$25,000 - \$75,000), compared to 44% citywide, establishing the Southwest as a predominantly middle-class community. About 22% of households in the Southwest earn below \$25,000, and 28% earn over \$75,000, statistics which are similar to the District as a whole (DCOP 2001).

Residential and Spatial Character

Another legacy of urban renewal efforts is the dominant residential character of the area. Although commercial space was planned originally to be dispersed along neighborhood streets, it was not implemented. The only significant retail was located at the "Town Center" of the Zeckendorf plan, now the Waterside Mall, and on the waterfront. The area was thus designed with residential and commercial areas segregated from each other, unlike the traditional mixed-use city patterns of established urban neighborhoods. Housing was designed in a series of inwardly-focused complexes with internal parking, green spaces and plazas. The closing of many original L'Enfant streets and the conversion of others into cul-de-sacs and driveways gave a sense of privacy and exclusivity to the various housing projects.

Although these aspects of urban renewal planning have made the Southwest a more privatized environment than other parts of the city, the area also contains many interesting examples of modernist housing and open space design, making it a laboratory for the design trends of the 1960's. In this respect the design of the neighborhood is unique in Washington DC, a city more known for its traditional historic buildings and housing types. The design of the various residential areas was an experiment in mixed housing types, combining high-rise (9-12 story) apartment blocks with low-rise townhouses. This variation of building heights and apartment types allowed a healthy mix of family sizes, income levels, home ownership and rentals to share the same neighborhood.

The varied building heights also prevented high-rise buildings from dominating the landscape. The separation of tall buildings, low townhouses and generous ground-level pedestrian areas have created a neighborhood with an open, airy sense of space, now enhanced with mature trees and landscape. The clean lines of modernist building styles give the Southwest a sense of progressive architectural character that does not rely on the recreation of historical styles common in other parts of the city. This approach can be a model for new developments on the waterfront and in the area, allowing for creative architectural expression in new buildings.

Maritime Life and Activity on the Channel

A diversity of maritime activities takes place along the Southwest Waterfront, from the Odyssey and the Spirit Cruises to the community of live-aboard residents who call Gangplank Marina home. Together, the Washington Marina, Capital Yacht Club, and Gangplank Marina provide slips for nearly 500 boats, and in the summer the Channel is full of transient boat moorings. The historic Fish Wharf further contributes to the Southwest's unique maritime character, bringing people from all over the District to the Waterfront daily.

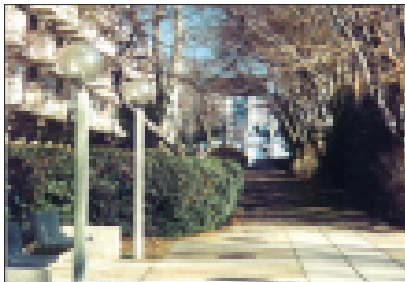


FIGURE 3.11
Pedestrian Oriented Spaces

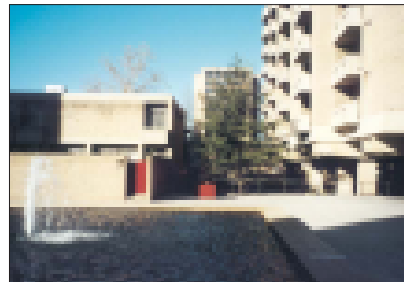


FIGURE 3.12
Architectural Character

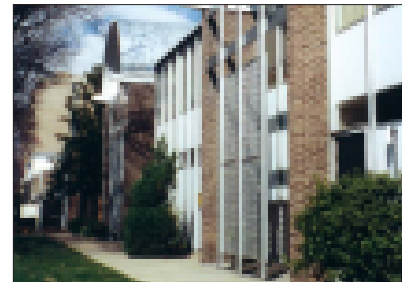


FIGURE 3.13
Residential Character

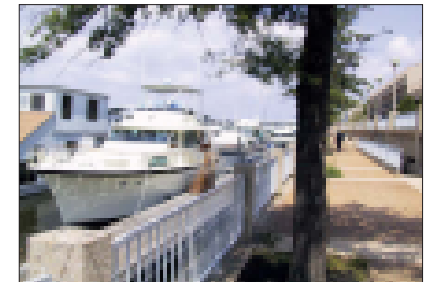


FIGURE 3.14
Maritime Activity



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Local Landmarks and Institutions

Although urban redevelopment caused the demolition of the entire Southwest quadrant, a few historically significant structures were saved, which are now important landmarks in the cultural heritage of Southwest and the District. In addition, the neighborhood has over ten local churches, a number of educational institutions, recreational centers, and unique cultural attractions such as Arena Stage.

Thomas Law House

Built in 1784, the Thomas Law House is a historical landmark on the National Register. Located at Sixth and N Streets, this Federal-style mansion was a social center for some of America's leading figures.

Fort Leslie J. McNair & National Defense University

Ft. Leslie J. McNair, a Southwest landmark established in 1794, is one of the nation's oldest military arsenals. This historic fort stands at the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers.

Benjamin Banneker Circle

This park with a commemorative fountain and view of the waterfront memorializes Benjamin Banneker, the nation's first recognized African-American scientist, who helped determine the boundaries of the District in 1791.

The Fish Wharf

The Fish Wharf is a colorful reminder of the old Southwest dating back to a time when boats ran up from the Chesapeake Bay bringing fresh fish and produce to the nation's capital. It continues to be an active and important asset for the area today.

Other historic landmarks include St. Dominic's Church on E Street, an 1875 Gothic church with a 250-foot spire; Wheat Row on 4th Street, Washington's earliest row houses, built in 1794; the Duncanson-Cranch House on N Street, built in 1794; and the Edward Simon Lewis House at 456 N Street, built in 1817.



FIGURE 3.15
Local Landmarks and Institutions



FIGURE 3.16
Thomas Law House



FIGURE 3.17
Benjamin Banneker Circle looking North



FIGURE 3.18
Fort McNair



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New Developments Near the Waterfront

New Developments

There are a number of current and proposed new developments in and near the Southwest neighborhood that demonstrate the favorable market conditions in the area for investments in residential, retail, office, and entertainment. These projects will complement and enhance the programming proposed in the Southwest Waterfront Development Plan.

Capitol Square Townhomes

The recently developed townhouses on 9th and G Streets are a short distance from the waterfront, directly adjacent to the 10th Street Overlook. These townhouses are three to four stories with one to two car garages and private courtyards. Sales have ranged between \$300,000 and \$600,000.

The Mandarin Oriental International Hotel

The Mandarin Oriental International signed an agreement in April of 2002 to build a 400-room, \$155-million luxury hotel north of the Washington Marina, which is slated for completion in 2004. A proposed pedestrian bridge will connect the site to public parkland and the marina. The proposed hotel will include a restaurant; 15,000-square-foot fitness center; indoor pool and spa; meeting space; and an 8,300-square-foot ballroom.

The Fish Wharf and Washington Marina

Congress recently authorized over three million dollars worth of improvements to the Fish Wharf and Washington Marina. Recent improvements at the Washington Marina include the addition of 91 new boat slips and a new roof on the Marina building. Parking improvements, landscaping, and new fencing are planned. At the Fish Wharf, the fish cleaning building will be demolished and rebuilt this year. Improvements to parking and traffic circulation are also planned.

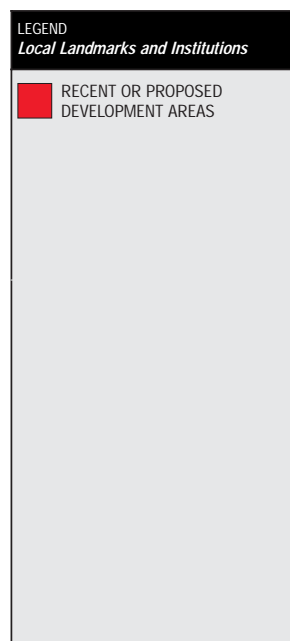
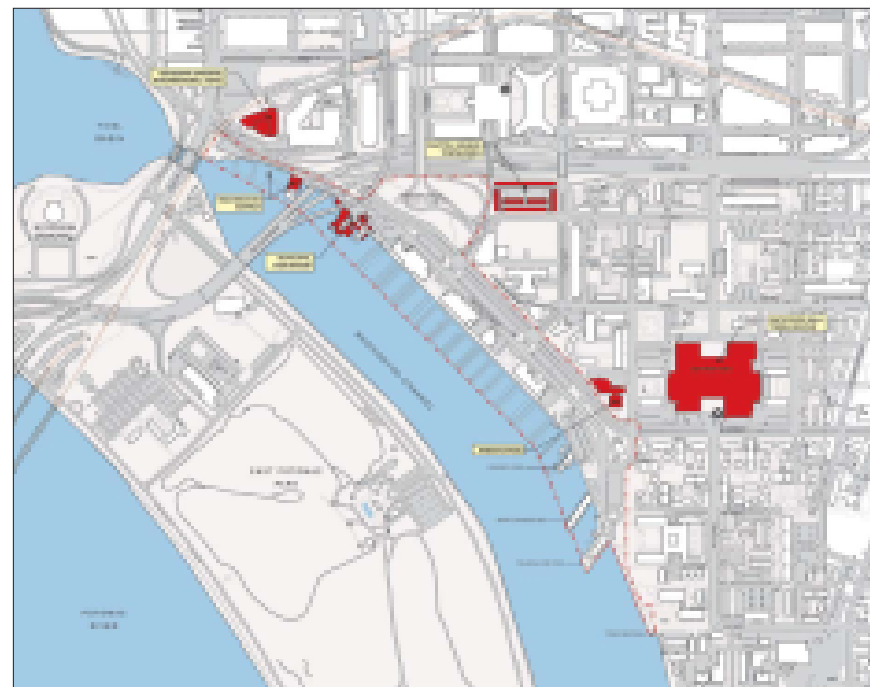


FIGURE 3.19
New Developments





Waterside Mall

A multi-phased redevelopment of the Waterside Mall (located at 4th and M Streets) is underway. The approved project is an adaptive re-use and expansion of the 1,150,000 square feet of rentable office and retail space currently at Waterside Mall. The final development will include approximately 2 million square feet of office, 100,000 square feet of retail and 400,000 square feet of residential space. The redevelopment will also include the re-opening of 4th Street through the site, for improved vehicular and pedestrian access.

The existing Waterside Mall has a number of neighborhood street level retail amenities, including a Safeway grocery store, a CVS drug store, and Bank of America. The proposed plan expands these retail amenities to include restaurants and other stores to serve the neighborhood and growing business community.

Arena Stage

Not far from Waterside Mall is Arena Stage, one of the country's leading not-for-profit resident theaters. Arena Stage has flourished in the Southwest for 42 of its 52 years of existence, and is currently planning for significant facility renovations and expansion that will allow the cultural institution to continue to grow while remaining in the Southwest community.

Development in the Near Southeast

The Near Southeast is connected to the Southwest neighborhood by the M Street corridor, and is currently undergoing dramatic redevelopment. There has been a significant increase in office space in the Near Southeast in recent years, with 200,000 square feet of new space occupied at the Washington Gas site and more in the planning stages; 800,000 square feet at the Navy Yard; 1.7 million square feet of office space planned for the new Federal Department of Transportation headquarters; and many additional office projects along the M Street corridor.

The Near Southeast is also a growing residential community, with over 700 units planned for the Copper-Carrollsbury HOPE VI development, and a significant residential component planned in the redevelopment of the Southeast Federal Center site that will add approximately 1,000 units of housing to the neighborhood.



FIGURE 3.20
Capitol Square Townhouses



FIGURE 3.21
Mandarin Oriental International Hotel

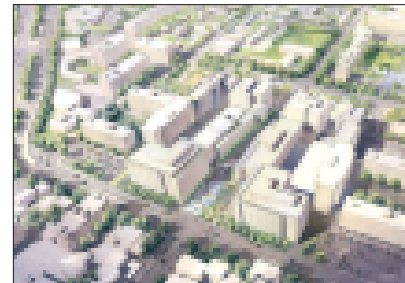


FIGURE 3.22
Proposed Waterside Mall Redevelopment



FIGURE 3.23
Arena Stage



Site and Neighborhood Issues

Connectivity and Circulation

The Southwest is separated and isolated from its urban surroundings by a number of barriers, resulting largely from the urban renewal projects of the 1950's and 60's. The Southeast/Southwest Freeway physically cuts the neighborhood off from the District, evident in the fact that tourism maps stop abruptly at the freeway.

The lack of pedestrian connections across this divide is especially apparent at the Tenth Street Overlook, where no means of access is provided for walking to the waterfront from L'Enfant Plaza. Despite this, people regularly scramble down the hillside and cross high speed traffic to reach the Fish Market. The Southwest Waterfront is psychologically remote from the National Mall although it is only a few blocks away, while the Tidal Basin and Potomac Park are separated from the area by traffic, making pedestrian and bicycle access from these areas hard to find and unwelcoming.

Neighborhood access to the waterfront is also made difficult by the road system. High-speed traffic and the width of Maine Avenue discourages pedestrian crossing, and combined with Water Street imposes twelve lanes of roadway between residents and the waterfront. The expanse of pavement forms a psychological divide, communicating that the area is dominated by automobiles and not intended as a pedestrian environment. Although just one block away, the waterfront promenade has a sense of remoteness from the Southwest neighborhood.

Environmental Issues

The expanse of pavement also causes environmental damage to the waterfront. Roads and parking lots account for some 42% of the land, with impervious surfaces that generate rainwater runoff, carrying pollutants to the Washington Channel and to surrounding areas. The hard surfaces also create an urban heat island effect by absorbing solar energy. This condition combines with the lack of vegetation and shade to form an unhealthy microclimate, which increases summer heat and cannot mitigate carbon dioxide emissions from traffic.

Traffic Impacts

Traffic on the waterfront creates both environmental and quality-of-life impacts. The speed and volume of Maine Avenue traffic is the result of its function as an arterial roadway connecting to M Street, and as an alternative route to the Freeway in congested periods. Although it passes through an urban residential area, Maine Avenue has fewer traffic lights, buildings or activities along its length than similar arterial roads in other parts of the city, resulting in increased traffic speeds and compromising pedestrian safety.

Tourist and charter buses create significant problems including visual, air quality, and noise pollution. Because of the oversized road capacity and lack of activity on the waterfront, bus drivers use the large expanses of Water Street and nearby parking lots as waiting areas for the return of tour groups. A taskforce headed by the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) has been formed to address the chronic District-wide problem of tour bus congestion, which demands an enforceable policy of designated bus parking facilities.

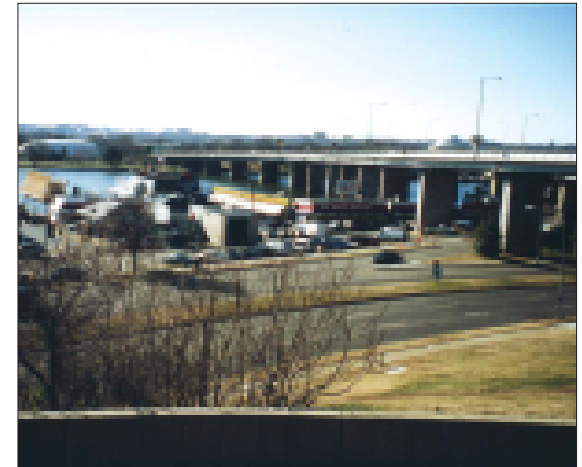


FIGURE 3.24
View from 10th Street Overlook to Fish Market



FIGURE 3.25
Highway 395 separates the Southwest Waterfront from the District

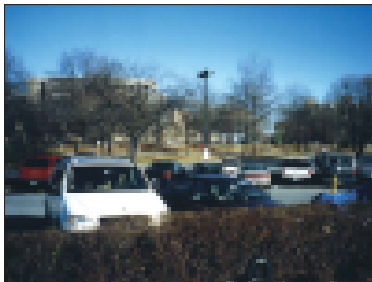


FIGURE 3.26
Existing Surface Parking Lot

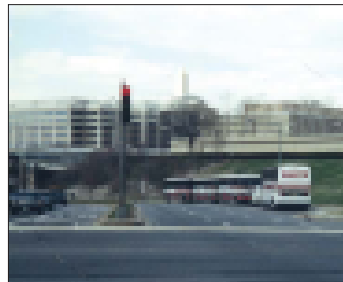


FIGURE 3.27
Tour Buses queue on Maine Avenue



FIGURE 3.28
Lack of Crossings along Maine Avenue